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The Mothman and Other Strange Tales: Shaping Queer Appalachia Through Folkloric Discourse in Online Social Media Communities

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The Mothman and Other Strange Tales:
Shaping Queer Appalachia Through Folkloric Discourse
in Online Social Media Communities

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Linguistic Theory and Typology in the
College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky

By

Brenton Watts

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Jennifer Cramer, Professor of Linguistics

Lexington, Kentucky

2020

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

The Mothman and Other Strange Tales: Shaping Queer Appalachia Through Folkloric Discourse in Online Social Media Communities

Little work has been conducted on the intersections of queer and Appalachian identities, in part because these two identities are viewed as incompatible (Mann 2016). This study uses a multimodal critical discourse analytic approach to examine the Instagram posts of the Queer Appalachia Project, which represent a substantial body of discourse created by and for queer Appalachians. Of specific interest to this analysis are those posts which employ folkloric figures, such as West Virginia's Mothman, to do identity work that is queer, Appalachian, and queer-Appalachian. Often, this act is accomplished through juxtaposition with Appalachian imagery and the reclamation of homophobic and anti-Appalachian tropes. This analysis finds that the iterative positioning of such figures as queer-Appalachian icons creates a series of texts through which the performance of queer-Appalachianity both transgresses and conforms to normative expectations (Pennycook 2007). In doing so, I track the real-time enregisterment of these legends as powerful discursive resources, and argue for their consideration as discursive *carte blanche*, where the freedom of imagination intrinsic to folkloric discourse allows for the innovative identity work necessary for queer-Appalachian ways of life.

KEYWORDS: discourse analysis, queer, linguistics, Appalachia, folklore, Mothman

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DEDICATION

For all the queers in the hollers and hills.
Our love is our strength.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
LIST OF FIGURES	vi
Introduction.....	1
CHAPTER 1. Contextualizing The Mothman	4
1.1.1 Introduction.....	4
1.1.2 History.....	5
CHAPTER 2. Literature Review.....	9
CHAPTER 3. Methods.....	22
3.1.1 Source	22
3.1.2 Procedure	22
CHAPTER 4. Analysis.....	24
4.1.1 Introduction.....	24
4.1.2 The Mothman of Queer Appalachia	25
4.1.3 Witches and Granny Women	33
CHAPTER 5. Conclusion	40
Bibliography	42
VITA.....	47

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: "Jort Season is Cum'n 4/21"	25
Figure 2: Mothman & Tudor's Biscuit World.....	29
Figure 3: Rocky Horror Mothman	31
Figure 4: Southern Lesbian Witches	33
Figure 5: Granny Witch's Against the KKK	38

INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, little attention has been paid to the lives and experiences of rural queer people. In particular, very little attention has been paid to the lives and experiences of queer Appalachians. One explanation for both of these issues may be that such a group of people is believed not to exist, or, if they do, the notion is that they do not exist in large enough numbers to warrant notice, let alone have needs, values, or experiences fundamentally different from their queer urban peers or their cisheteronormative rural counterparts. Another possible explanation is that the acknowledgment of queer Appalachian ways of life—or alternatively, Appalachian queer ways of life—complicates hegemonic narratives about both queerness and Appalachians. Namely, queer Appalachians complicate the discourse of queer metronormativity, which, in addition to positioning the rural and the urban as both spatially and socially opposed, also imagines urban spaces as the only places where queer community and liberation may be found (Halberstam 2005). Likewise, they also complicate the discourse of Appalachians, both from within and without the region, as being intrinsically tied to heteronormativity. In opposition to the hegemonic forces of heteronormativity, homonormativity, and metronormativity, queer studies has coined the notion of queer anti-urbanism—a set of theoretical viewpoints which seek to critically interrogate urbanist and homonormative assumptions and assertions (Herring 2007; 2010).

By their very existence, queer Appalachians challenge normative assumptions about what it means to be queer and about what it means to be Appalachian, and by extension, what it means to be rural and urban. Therefore, the interactional community practices of queer Appalachians, with their potential for reshaping social reality and challenging hegemonic discourses, are of great interest not just to scholars, but also to activists and movement leaders working to abolish the fascist infrastructures which buttress the systemic oppression and inequality. As a queer Appalachian myself, I see this as confirmation of the fact that the potential for real change and justice is found not within the ‘charity’ of outside actors and organizations, but within ourselves and our communities. Fortunately, I am not alone in this belief. The Queer Appalachia (QA)

Instagram community, whose interactions comprise the totality of the data under analysis here, shares this belief as well.

Though there is an innumerable amount of important and distinct social phenomena happening throughout this discourse, for this analysis I focus only on the use of folkloric themes, images, and discourse as they appear in the posts of the QA Instagram account. The purpose in the centering of folklore in this research is twofold. For one, as the data under analysis demonstrate, the prevalence of folkloric discourse throughout the QA Instagram account is more than salient, in that most posts reference or feature at least one supernatural or legendary figure. I therefore theorize that these folklore-centric communicative acts are of some social consequence. By this same metric, the most central folklore to this analysis is the legend of the Mothman of Point Pleasant, West Virginia¹. Second, folklore is, in many ways, a cornerstone of human experience—it ties us to our histories, our ancestors, and our communities (Wilson 1988). More broadly, folklore often acts as the ideological staging grounds where controversial social issues can be contended over (Ellis 2003). Most important to this analysis, though, is that folklore gives us *something to talk about*. In fact, as this analysis demonstrates, *how* we talk about folklore also reveals a lot about how we forge and maintain our identities through interaction with others.

In this thesis, I present a multimodal critical discourse analysis (MMCDA) of nearly four years' worth of Instagram posts from the QA Instagram account. Throughout the analysis, I highlight the ways in which these folkloric discourses are both a substrate for and byproduct of social interactions within online, queer Appalachian, social media communities. Furthermore, I also identify several important functions performed by means of the discourse. The most important of these are 1) the reconciliation and union of queerness and Appalachianness, and 2) advocacy for leftist praxis and antifascist, antiracist resistance. I attribute these phenomena, in part, to an attempt at reclaiming abusive rhetoric that describes both queer people and Appalachian (or rural) people as dangerous "others" who exist at the margins of societies and pose a threat to the majority, in much the same way the monsters of legend stalk the outskirts of the town. By aligning

¹ A brief but detailed description of the Mothman legend appears in the following section.

themselves with these conceptual figures to which maligners may readily compare them, queer (and) Appalachian people are able to, in a sense, disarm the abusive rhetoric and mitigate potential emotional or social harm. As for the radical leftism, both I and other QA community members trace our political heritage to the coal miners throughout Appalachia who armed themselves and rose up against the corrupt capitalist mine owners during the Coal Wars of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Bailey 2008; Corbin 1998; Corbin 2011; Shogan 2004). This particular political alignment, known to some as “Cornbread Communism,” is integral to the Queer Appalachia project, and so too is it integral as well to the discourse of the QA Instagram community (*Cornbread Communism Manifesto* 2018). In sum, these findings reveal how queer Appalachians are (re-)defining for themselves what it means to be queer, Appalachian, and queer Appalachian, a (re-definition which challenges long-held, harmful stereotypes about sexuality, gender, and politics in the region, and ultimately, sees that challenge through to the end.

CHAPTER 1. CONTEXTUALIZING THE MOTHMAN

1.1.1 Introduction

Although there are no confirmed pictures or comprehensive descriptions of the creature, eyewitness reports and subsequent artistic interpretations of the Mothman seem to always agree on two things: one, its hulking, winged, humanoid form, and two, a pair of large, red, glowing eyes, comparable in size, color, and luminescence to traffic stop-lights. To match its terrifying visage, the creature is said to be capable of sustained flight over long distances at high speeds, a skill with which it is said to have terrorized eyewitnesses.

Though some may doubt the veracity of these account, the legend of the Mothman is decidedly supernatural in nature. As such, the Mothman of legend belongs to a group of folkloric figures known as “cryptids,” a distinction it shares with the likes of Bigfoot, El Chupacabra, and the Loch Ness Monster. Cryptids are creatures whose existence is assumed by believers or followers of the pseudoscience known as cryptozoology. In this context, I use the term “pseudoscience” to distinguish this school of thought from other ways of knowledge based on more rigorous, methodologies appropriate for the academy. I do not intend to suggest that witnesses of or believers in the Mothman and associated phenomena are in any way lacking in character or credibility. Instead, it must be acknowledged that cryptozoology, like other scientifically unsubstantiated belief systems, is based on the faith and practices of the community that upholds it. Moreover, it is not the objective of this analysis to extract a singular, “accurate” characterization of the folklore from the discourse. Rather, the intention is to highlight and examine several unnoticed, innovative, and socially meaningful interpretations of that folklore in the interest of contributing to a substantially multivocalic account of folkloric discourse.

The notion of multivocality, or polyphony, was integral to the literary analyses of Mikhail Bakhtin, wherein it was described as “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (Bakhtin 1963;1984: 6-7). In their book *Popobawa: Tanzanian Talk, Global Misreadings*, Katrina Daly Thompson employs this notion of multivocality in their analysis of discourse about the titular legend and argues that polyphony is both a feature inherent to Popobawa discourse as well as a value to pursue while writing about it. As both a contribution and homage to these efforts, I also aim to acknowledge the inherent multivocality of folkloric discourse about the Mothman and other legends. I would also add that not only is multivocality a concept well-suited to the analysis of folkloric discourse, but that it is also well-suited to understanding the diverse and contrastive lived experiences that characterize what it means to be a queer Appalachian.

Despite these sturdy theoretical foundations, I must also acknowledge the functional limitations of attempting to fairly and accurately represent discourse and speech communities in all their multivocalic splendor; specifically, that it really isn't possible to do that. Instead, with the notion of multivocality in mind, I situate this project and its findings as my own contributions to larger discourses about, for example, folklore, the Mothman, and queer Appalachia. That said, the following represents, more or less, my best attempt at succinctly recounting the origins of the Mothman legend, as well as prominent subsequent iterations of the legend.

1.1.2 History

The first reported sighting of the Mothman occurred on November 12, 1966 when five men were digging a grave at a cemetery in Clendenin, West Virginia, and reported

seeing a humanoid figure swoop down low over their heads. Subsequently, the creature was sighted again in the “TNT area” just north of Point Pleasant, West Virginia. Once the site of a manufacturing plant and government storage facility for explosive materials (hence the name), the TNT area is a forested 8,000 acres populated by a number of now abandoned, earthen bunkers designed to minimize the level of destruction should their contents decide to explode. At the time, it was a popular destination for an evening drive, a kind of lover’s lane for young people, so it was no surprise that two teenage couples had decided to go for a drive through the area on the night of November 15th, 1966. Under the headlights of their car, they reported seeing “a large flying man with ten-foot wings” whose eyes “glowed red” (Nickell 2004). They say it was hunkered down, feeding on the corpse of a dead German Shepherd, later identified as the pet of a farmer from a couple counties away. When it took notice of them, the creature is said to have begun its pursuit, easily matching the top speed of the car with its massive wings. The two couples escaped the creature and reported the occurrence to the local authorities. Their story was picked up by the town newspaper, which famously described the creature as a “Man-Sized Bird...Creature...Something” (Point Pleasant Register 1966). Over the next thirteen months, more people reported similar encounters. Some, they say, were infected with a rare form of conjunctivitis (pink eye), allegedly caused by the creature’s glowing red eyes. Others reported strange electrical phenomena, mysterious phone calls, and threatening visits from men in black. Then, on December 15th, 1967, tragedy struck. The Silver Bridge, which connected Point Pleasant, West Virginia to Gallipolis, Ohio, collapsed, sending 46 people to their deaths (LeRose 2001). While experts reported that it was due to a preventable architectural failure, many onlookers and community members

were not convinced. Some eyewitnesses reported seeing a strange, winged figure hunched atop one of the bridge towers, and placed their blame accordingly (Keel 1975). Still others thought that the creature's relationship to the tragedy was not as the cause, but rather as a harbinger sent to caution against, or even prevent, such a tragic loss of life.

After the collapse of the Silver Bridge, sightings of the Mothman in the area came to a halt. However, the legend was far from over. Some accounts allege that the Mothman's appearance was connected to an increase in UFO sightings, while others attribute more spiritual origins to the creature. Creepypastas (scary stories intended to be copied and pasted around the internet) still speak of the creature's reappearance in Chernobyl prior to the infamous nuclear disaster in 1986 and again in Moscow prior to the 1999 apartment bombings (Lobkov 2002). Photographs also seem to suggest that the Mothman appeared in New York City just prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. More recently, multiple sightings of the creature were reported in Chicago and around Lake Michigan throughout 2017 and were attributed by some to the turmoil of the 2016 presidential election and the subsequent inauguration of Donald Trump as president (Wayland 2019).

In 1975, John Keel published his book *The Mothman Prophecies*, and a 2002 film adaptation familiarized many people with the legend for the first time. Mothmen have also appeared as important characters in podcasts like *The Adventure Zone* by West Virginia's McElroy brothers and videogames like Bethesda's *Fallout 76* and Atlus's *Persona 5* (McElroy et al. 2018; Bethesda Game Studios 2018; P-Studios 2016). In addition to an ever-growing assortment of Mothman-themed food, drink, and memorabilia available in-town and online, Point Pleasant today is also home to The

World's Only Mothman Museum next door to a life-size metal sculpture of the creature. The museum collects and displays original artefacts and eyewitness accounts from each incident, including the Silver Bridge Collapse, as well as props, wardrobe, and other paraphernalia from *The Mothman Prophecies* film. On the third weekend of every September, Point Pleasant also hosts its annual Mothman Festival, a town-wide event which features live music, cosplay contests, a 5k run, and guest speakers such as original Mothman witnesses and noted cryptozoologists. The festival attracts over 10,000 people from the world over, demonstrating even further how prominent the Mothman legend has become within the cultural zeitgeist, even on a global scale (Johnson 2019).

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Given that this thesis concerns the shaping of identity, a description of the concept of identity is duly necessary. In linguistic anthropology, identities are largely understood as entities constructed through social interaction (Bucholtz and Hall 2004). Importantly, these entities are dynamic, not static; they develop over a person's lifetime, yet emerge within the context of each individual interaction (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). Despite this, a person is always understood as being the same individual (Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990). Therefore, many theorists of identity, in addition to many folk theories about identity, understand a person as having a range of identities (or facets of a larger identity that is presumed to be equivalent to the individual) that they are then able to employ in different interactions based on their own motives, other interactants' actions, the social and material context of the interaction, et cetera. The way these identities are enacted is through performativity, a concept which, in linguistic anthropology at least, originates from within J.L. Austin's Speech Act Theory (1962). Austin argues that all utterances are performative actions, in that they enact that which they describe. The benchmark example of a performative utterance is often something like "I now pronounce you husband and husband," in which, given the right circumstances, the act of marrying two men together is successfully (or felicitously) performed. Judith Butler's notion of performativity takes this further, arguing that gender is also enacted through performativity, in that it constitutes the very thing it performs. In fact, it is this very idea which has caused linguistic anthropologists to reject the notion that identity is pre-discursive, in favor of a theory of identity which understands its subject as emergent through interaction. More broadly, this can be applied to other dimensions of identity, such as race and sexuality, as

well (Hall 1999). In turn, queerness, Appalachianness, and queer-Appalachianness must also trace their origins to the interactions of queer (and) Appalachian communities.

Pennycook more or less encapsulates the task at hand for queer Appalachians in responding to these constraints by suggesting that the nature of performativity is a balancing act in that the performative is always along pre-existing lines, yet simultaneously has the potential to refashion new futures (Pennycook 2007). In this sense, Mothman discourse, in the interest of indexing or creating queer (and) Appalachian identities, draws upon pre-existing discourses where villains or monstrous creatures are associated with queer characteristics, queer people intentionally identify with villains and monstrous creatures, or where Appalachia is depicted as the periphery of proper or modern society (Li-Volmmer et al. 2003; Massey 2007). However, it again works to reconcile “queer” and “Appalachian” in such a way that the future of both identities is constantly being shaped and reformed as determined by the needs of queer Appalachians and the constraints under which they interact. This research therefore represents one of many bodies of Mothman discourse, but one that specifically offers a substantial substrate for examining and understanding the continuous construction of queer (and) Appalachian identities. Furthermore, it no surprise that the staging grounds for queer Appalachian identity negotiation is an online social media platform like Instagram. In fact, Gray (2009) identifies the multiple ways in which queer people throughout rural and Appalachian Kentucky work at and through the boundaries of public space, both in their physical communities and most notably, online.

In centering the intersections of queer and Appalachian identities, this research also highlights the efforts made by queer Appalachians to reconcile two seemingly at-

odds identities, namely that of queerness and Appalachianness. As Bjork-James (2018) explains, a person who claims an LGBT identity within an evangelical culture will likely be marked as the kind person who is incompatible with evangelical values and their interpretation of Christianity. In addition to folk assumptions which link ‘sounding gay’ to ‘being gay,’ there is also a presumed incompatibility between ‘sounding southern’ and ‘sounding gay.’ In showing that ‘sounding gay’ and ‘sounding southern’ are not inherently incompatible, Mann (2016) also found that these presumptive ideologies actually constrain listeners’ perceptions, such that speakers are heard as either southern or gay, but not both. Furthermore, when examining the interplay between gender, sexuality, rurality and the phonetic realization of /s/ , Podesva & Van Hofwegen (2015) found it useful to consider how in communities where rurality is a central axis of social distinction, language users are more likely to subscribe to traditional social mores regarding gender and sexuality. As will be demonstrated, this likelihood varies with queer Appalachian Mothman discourse, wherein rurality, still as a pronounced marker of social distinction, is intentionally conflated with queerness. In short, these studies reflect the lived reality that queer people must face; therefore, the task placed upon queer people to manage the social constraints imposed upon them is at least twofold. This work also demonstrates how an intersectional analysis of linguistic practice, which takes into account gender, sexuality, and rurality, is necessary for revealing the spectrum of use for certain linguistic practices. Likewise, although not phonetic or variationist in nature, the present work is still complementary to works like Podesva & Van Hofwegen (2015) and Mann (2013), in that it attempts to understand language use as hindered or enabled by

multiple axes of constraint, particularly those of sexuality, gender, rurality, and sociopolitical conservatism.

In fact, I argue that any analysis of queer Appalachian community practices necessitates an intersectional approach. Drawing upon Crenshaw's (1989; 1991) model of intersectionality, I posit that queer Appalachians are caught in the intersections of queerphobia and anti-Appalachianism, both of which, I might add, are intrinsically tied to other systems of oppression. To echo Crenshaw, the intersection of queerphobia and anti-Appalachianism factor into the lives of queer Appalachians in ways that cannot be entirely captured by looking at the queer or Appalachian components as separate phenomena. Instead, it must be understood that while queer Appalachians may experience queerphobia and anti-Appalachianism, they experience it in ways unique to them. In other words, queer Appalachians don't experience queerphobia like their queer non-Appalachian counterparts, nor do they experience anti-Appalachianism. For example, although the sexually deviant hillbilly rapists from the 1972 film *Deliverance* are both homophobic and anti-Appalachian, they also represent a synthesized kind of antagonism directed specifically towards queer Appalachians.

Furthermore, this research demonstrates the ways in which people use language in creative ways and within the constraints of their specific culture to both create and maintain identity boundaries (Thompson 2017). This is an important caveat, because to be queer and/or to be Appalachian is to be unwillingly subjected to the oppression of a hegemonic system which values cisheteronormativity and the upper, urban class, and restricts queer and Appalachian people to only a handful of "appropriate" roles. In fact, the situation for queer Appalachians is all the more serious considering that much of

Appalachia, as an unfortunate hotspot for evangelical Christianity and anti-LGBT political positions, is potentially an unsafe environment for queer people (Bjork-James, 2018). These hegemonic forces are recognizable in the cultural conventions that dictate and attempt to standardize or unify language use; specifically, how it is used and what it is used to talk about (Eastman & Russel, 1983). For example, one such force is that of cisheteronormativity, which prescribes that queer identities and relationships not be acknowledged or discussed, or homonormativity, which prescribes that only certain “appropriate” queer identities and relationships, such as that between monogamous cisgender gay men, be acknowledged or discussed. Additionally, forces relevant to this analysis are those of classism, which favors the middle and upper (non-rural) class, and linguistic prescriptivism. In this case specifically, the forces at play are cisheteronormative in that they only allow cisgender and heterosexual ways of talking about gender sexuality (i.e., not through Mothman discourse), and homonormative, in that they only allow for “proper” ways of being queer (i.e., not Appalachian or rural, and again, not through Mothman discourse).

Indeed, part of the reason that queer Appalachian folkloric discourse is so useful, and therefore, interesting, is because it demonstrates the ways in which people are able to use language to navigate these complex and potentially dangerous systems created by these hegemonic forces. Here, the language users take advantage of Mothman discourse to identify themselves as queer and/or Appalachian in ways that transgress, though do not necessarily violate, hegemonic social constraints, and through this, shape a unique kind of identity that is uniquely queer *and* Appalachian. In doing so, they also innovate a new

discourse and set of symbols that can be used by others to also identify as or with queer people, Appalachian people, or both simultaneously (Thompson 2017).

Of course, this shaping of identity and innovation of discourse doesn't just "happen." Instead, these somewhat complex processes are best described and understood through the theory of indexicality. This is to say that Mothman and other folkloric figures (and subsequent discourse about them) have become indexical signs whose meaning is dependent on the context in which they occur (Johnstone 1996; Johnstone 2003; Agha 1998; Agha 2005; Silverstein 2003). This is an important distinction, as Mothman discourse can and does mean different things in different places and to different people. For example, for speakers from Point Pleasant, West Virginia, Mothman discourse may index alignment towards the community and local folklore; in Point Pleasant itself, Mothman discourse may not stand out like it might elsewhere, as the legend and associated cultural artefacts constitute a sizeable and familiar part of the town's geo-cultural backdrop. The possibility for this kind of association between regional(ized) differences and other linguistic, cultural, and historical facts about a region was most notably detailed by Tannen (1984). Johnstone (2003) elaborates further upon how regional and ethnic variability can function as a strategic resource in discourse. Johnstone's insistence on the term *resource* is essential to the argument of this thesis. Rather than claim that Mothman discourse is something practiced by all queer (and) Appalachian people, I adopt Johnstone's terminology to instead suggest that Mothman and associated icons constitute a set of discursive resources available to queer (and) Appalachian speakers. These resources can then be used in myriad ways by in-the-know

speakers to do various kinds of identity work, and in the right context, identity work in the spheres of queerness and Appalachianiness.

Moreover, as I demonstrate in this thesis, the meanings indexed by Mothman discourse (and in fact, any discourse) are of varied types and are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The model developed in Eckert (2008) organizes these varied types of indexical meanings into three levels: stances, traits, and categories. For example, in her study on the speech of white adolescent high school students in the Detroit suburbs, Eckert found higher usage of urban variants by the urban-oriented and school-alienated ‘burnouts.’ The burnouts, as Eckert argues, “[were] embedding a linguistic opposition between city and suburb within a community to support a local opposition between urban- and school-oriented kids (2008;458). Importantly, the enacting of this opposition was only possible due to what suburban kids associated with urban life and urban kids. In the same way, I aim to demonstrate that Mothman discourse, for example, does not directly communicate something queerness and/or Appalachianiness—in fact, it too is only made possible due to the sociocultural context and the lived experiences of those engaging in Mothman discourse. Lastly, through these two lower-level indexical associations, in addition to many others, it may also mark someone as belonging to the higher-level *category of queer Appalachian*. For this study, the most important fact about indexicals is that the same unit of discourse could index a dozen different meanings each to a dozen different people; there is virtually no limit to the number and types of things any bit of discourse could index. As an example deserving of further analysis, many people are likely to object to associating themselves or their identity groups with monsters known to terrorize communities and foretoken death. For these people, the

meanings indexed by such discourse is negative in nature. In fact, this especially holds true for queer people, due to previous queerphobic discourses which characterize them as monsters who pose a threat to society. As such, they would understandably be wary of the people who hold these conversations, many of which, to them, may index *homophobic* or *dangerous*, and therefore give more than enough reason to be wary.

How is it, then, that other members of the selfsame group can participate in this kind of discourse to denounce homophobia, celebrate queerness, and reconcile the dual identities of *Appalachian* and *queer*? The answer lies within the notion of enregisterment (Agha 2005). Keeping in mind that *registers* are groupings of indexical signs that point to similar, related contexts, *enregisterment* then refers to the process through which these registers are formed. Enregisterment has been described in different yet parallel terms by Labov, Silverstein, and Johnstone (Johnstone, Andrus, and Danielson 2006). In the interest of mirroring Johnstone's work on regional identity, I adopt her terminology for use in this analysis. Specifically, I use her description of indexicals as being either first-order, second-order, or third-order to describe the extent to which they are enregistered. From first to third, these orders are organized from least salient to most to least salient. For example, a first-order indexical is only said to be correlated with social meaning (i.e., high frequency of regional variants indexing one's relationship to Pittsburgh and southwestern Pennsylvania). As such, Labov referred to them as *indicators* (1972). In contrast, second- and third-order indexicals are available for social work. The meaning of second-order indexicals, referred to by Labov as *markers*, are largely shaped by ideological constraints and prior discursive experience. Likewise, the highly salient third-

order indexicals reinforce the essentialist linking of place and dialect; notably, Labov called them *stereotypes*.

Given that this work takes a discourse analytic approach to graphic and written data collected from social media, I diverge from Johnstone's interest in dialectal variation proper in favor of discursive variation associated with queer (and) Appalachian social media groups. Therefore, instead of making claims about the enregisterment and indexicality of things like lexical items and phonological features, I instead employ Johnstone's notions to make those kinds of claims about discourse topics, like Mothman. There is precedence in treating discourse topics as indexically associated with regional and other identities. Cramer (2013), for example, establishes that residents from Louisville, Kentucky (a linguistic and cultural border zone) have access to multiple regional affiliations, and therefore, multiple discourses to draw upon in order to realize those affiliations. Furthermore, Walker (2019) establishes that discourse subjects with strong indexical ties to regional identity have the potential to effect dialectal shifts in speech production, further establishing discourse itself as a site for indexicality. Furthermore, the incorporation of enregisterment and orders of indexicality into this analysis also entails the inclusion of genre. If registers point to contexts, then genres point to the type of speech event occurring (Hall 1999). For example, in the same way that the use of "dude" or "bro" may point to a specific but informal genre of interaction, so too does this informal genre point to (and in fact, co-constitute) the speech event of "casual conversation with friend." Both of these notions are important tools for understanding the data at hand, in that queer Appalachian Mothman social media discourse, like all discourses, is both constrained and informed by both its register and genre. That said,

these ideas are most integral to this analysis in that, as I will demonstrate, they help to explain what the data represent, which is the real-time enregisterment of discursive topics within a social media community.

In the interest of multivocality, it is also vital to note that much of the folkloric discourse under analysis here is rooted in humor. This makes sense because, as Bourg & Hertzler (1971) states, “humor breaks down an expectation system by replacing congruous elements with incongruous ones.” In other words, at least one of the reasons why something like “Mothman is real and he’s gay” is funny is because it swaps out the expectation for “what the Mothman is” and replaces it with a characteristic that one would not think relevant to the Mothman. However, it is also important to remember that in doing this, “[humor] informs us—indirectly—which elements belong in the system and which do not” (Bourg & Hertzler 1971). For example, here the humor is derived from the incongruity between the Mothman and gayness, or perhaps the Mothman and any kind of sexuality, given that a monster’s sexual orientation is usually the least of anyone’s concerns. By this same token, through a cisheteronormative and/or metronormative lens, the notion of a queer Appalachian person may seem ridiculous—again, due to their incongruity. Therefore, another possible function of queer Appalachian folkloric discourse, specifically that which centers monsters like the Mothman, is that it symbolically enacts the reclamation of anti-queer Appalachian prejudice. In other words, QA is taking the perceived incongruity to the extreme and identifying with that extreme, and in doing so, they are nullifying any potential harm derived from this kind of anti-queer Appalachian “humor” discourse. This kind of overtly sexual (and by extension queer) interpretation of the Mothman is not unique to queer Appalachia. Generally

speaking, the internet abounds with memes that queer and/or sexualize the Mothman and other cryptids. In fact, the Mothman statue, which has sat in the middle of Point Pleasant since 2003, is decidedly sexual and overtly masculine in its design; see, for example, the 12-foot tall metallic cryptid's broad, hairy chest, ten-pack abs, and toned buttocks. The sexual character of the statue is salient enough that many people take suggestive photos with the statue as a kind of souvenir; one popular pose, for example, has the subject parody swiping a credit card between the statue's butt cheeks. Therefore, in addition to humor, queer and/or sexual (re-)interpretations of the Mothman are also indexing and elaborating upon the overt sexuality of the Mothman statue, and in doing so, further enregisters the Mothman as overtly sexual and/or queer.

Understanding the purpose and function of Mothman discourse is especially necessary as the legend of the Mothman takes on a more globalized and mass media-mediated component (Bourg & Hertzler 1971). As Thompson writes about the globalization of the Popobawa, so too is it possible for the globalization of the Mothman to allow for its movement "beyond the boundaries of its culture of origin and...[to] be repurposed" (2017). This kind of globalization through mass media can be seen in both social media discourse about the Mothman and the inclusion of the creature as a character in Bethesda's *Fallout 76*. Most importantly, this globalization potential for the legend itself may also allow for the globalization and spread of the identities and characteristics associated with talk about the legend, namely, queerness, Appalachianness, and queer Appalachianness. All in all, it would be keen to consider the possibility that the Mothman legend, with all its associated discourses and iconographies may be moving in the direction of an intertextual media series, à la Hill (2005). Examples of similar

phenomena, wherein linguistic and discourse markers are expressly associated with cultural or linguistic icons and practices through the medium of videogames, can be found in previous literature; for example, Mendoza-Denton (2011) found that creaky voice, in certain communities of practice, had become indexical of a “hardcore Chicana/o” persona, and that this indexical marker had been picked up and amplified by Rockstar’s 2004 *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* in the interest of representing a Chicano gangster character. In light of such findings, it would serve researchers and community members well to pay special attention to the ways in which the Mothman legend, which has now come to represent both joint and individual queerness and Appalachanness among other things, is portrayed by mass media, and what this may entail for the enregisterment of certain discourse usage as indexical or representative of certain people or identities.

As both the Mothman legend and Appalachia come to prominence in an increasingly globalized world, the goals of this research become all the more urgent. As Blommaert writes in *Discourse*, “if voice ‘in the era of globalization becomes a matter of the capacity to accomplish functions of linguistic resources translocally, across different physical and social spaces, ...the capacity for semiotic mobility,’ then when Popobawa goes global, Tanzanians have very little voice” (2005). Similarly, the Mothman legend, with its distinct ties to Appalachian and its burgeoning ties to both queerness and queer Appalachanness, stands the chance of being misinterpreted and misappropriated by outsiders, if it hasn’t been already. In other words, as the Mothman legend begins to go

global thanks to media such as *Fallout 76*, then (queer) Appalachians also run the risk of having very little voice as well.²

² This concern was actually directly expressed by QA in a post made when the game was first announced. Community members were concerned that the game's depiction of a post-apocalyptic, nuclear wasteland version of West Virginia would reinforce harmful stereotypes about the region, in addition to the game's potential mis-appropriation of local folklore and culture for story and gameplay elements.

CHAPTER 3. METHODS

3.1.1 Source

The data under analysis was collected from the Instagram account of the Queer Appalachia Project, @QueerAppalachia. According to their official website, Queer Appalachia is a memorial project for the late Bryn Kelly, a trans woman writer, artist, activist, and self-proclaimed “Granny Witch.” (Queer Appalachia, 2020) The Queer Appalachia Instagram account began in 2016 to create an online community and resource collective for queer Appalachians and Southerners (Manzella 2018) Broadly, the project focuses on reclaiming and redefining queer (and) Appalachian narratives, as well as fostering mutual aid and harm reduction efforts, especially as they relate to the opioid crisis and other public health issues currently afflicting Appalachia and the South. As such, it is an ideal community for serious inquiry into the identity work necessary for leftist, queer-Appalachian identity- and community-making.

3.1.2 Procedure

The methods used in this analysis are drawn from Moran and Lee (2013), wherein the authors conduct a multimodal critical discourse analysis (MMCDA) of Australian surgical websites selling genital cosmetic surgery to women (Machin and Mayr 2012). The data was collected on December 18, 2019 by taking screenshots of every post made by the Queer Appalachia Instagram account which featured, referenced, or otherwise made use of discourse or iconography about folk monsters and legends. In total, the data set consisted of 168 posts and spanned from the beginning of the account on May 22, 2016 to the day the data was collected. Many posts containing multiple images thanks to

Instagram's "multiple upload" function. Once all posts were printed, they were then labelled and categorized based on the folklore they employed. Notes were taken, and the posts were then reanalyzed for discursive themes. Once this was done, posts were grouped based on both their folkloric subject(s) and their discursive themes. Through this iterative process of coding and analyzing, I was able to construct a larger analysis of how folkloric subjects are used in online social media to enact discourse and perform identity.

CHAPTER 4. ANALYSIS

4.1.1 Introduction

This analysis consists of three parts. The first and primary part is an analysis of the Mothman and his associated legendry insofar as they are employed in the posts of the QA Instagram account. To emphasize the intersectional character of the QA community and its discourse, I begin this section with an analysis of Mothman as a queer-Appalachian icon. Following that, I present an analysis of a post which primarily characterizes Mothman as Appalachian, though does not in any way contradict a queer interpretation of the creature. I conclude this triptych with a complementary analysis of a post which primarily characterizes the Mothman as queer. The second part of this analysis is devoted to other folkloric figures and legends featured in the collected data. This secondary analysis focuses on the prevalence of posts on the account which feature or reference witches, granny women, or their associated legendry. Specifically, I aim to elucidate the ways in which the QA Instagram employs these folkloric figures to do gender and sexuality-based identity work in ways that parallel the identity work enacted by Mothman discourse.

Importantly, I argue that a lot of the discourse and identity work happening on the QA Instagram account, especially that which centers the Mothman, is successfully enacted through indexical disjuncture (Barrett 2017). Indexical disjuncture describes the performative combination of indexical signs that point towards identities typically assumed to be incongruous or even incompatible with one another. This combination confounds, challenges, and defies hegemonic assumptions about identity categories. For

example, Thompson (2019) finds that indexical disjuncture is used by LGBT Muslims to simultaneously index queerness and Muslimness. In doing so, LGBT Muslims create social space for themselves and allow for (re-)interpretations and (re-)clamations of both queer Muslimness and, in ways that even expand the discursive possibilities for their cisgender and/or heterosexual counterparts.

4.1.2 The Mothman of Queer Appalachia



Figure 1: "Jort Season is Cum'n 4/21"

Figure 1 depicts a paper doll Mothman with blue-to-yellow gradient wings, a shadowy-black body, piercing red eyes, and an insectoid mouth.³ He is photoshopped into the foreground of a picture of an actual field; in the background features what looks like the rolling green hills of the Appalachian Mountains. Mothman himself wears a red-and-white checkered bowtie, denim cutoff shorts (or ‘jorts’, a portmanteau for ‘jean shorts’), and nothing else, revealing his toned physique. The accompanying caption from Queer Appalachia (QA) is “#jortseason is cum’n & #blueridgemountain #mothman is feel’n it! #showusyoutjortscollaboration.” Taken altogether with the context of the social media account, this post constitutes one component of a larger discourse about queerness, Appalachianiness, queer-Appalachianiness, and the Mothman legendry. To begin, Mothman’s checkered bowtie, jorts, and otherwise complete lack of clothing evoke the image of a male stripper (à la Chippendales), therefore indexing something about *intense* or *overt sexuality*. This indexical meaning is further supported by the paper doll’s physique, which also indexes Point Pleasant’s Mothman statue and its overtly sexual design as well. Against the assumed context of a culture dominated by Christian evangelicism, this further indexes a specific kind of sexuality, one that is in some way *transgressive* or *non-normative*. This sexual indexical meaning is reinforced by the spelling of “coming” as “cum’n,” referencing the common slang for orgasm or ejaculation.

However, Mothman’s attire is not just indexically queer; it is also distinctively rural, and by that same token, implicitly Appalachian. The most obvious of these

³ The paper doll Mothman is a product sold by Queer Appalachia to support their mutual aid and harm reduction efforts. As such, the doll shows up often in Mothman-related posts made by the account.

distinctly Appalachian indices are Mothman's large, gradient wings, which are meant to resemble the Blue Ridge Mountains, a fact further supported by the hashtags included in QA's caption (#blueridgemountain #mothman). Additionally, given the rural context of the post and the account, it may actually be more accurate to describe Mothman as wearing a pair of Daisy Dukes, named for being worn by the character of the same name on TV's *The Dukes of Hazzard*. Furthermore, the red-and-white checkered bowtie, although not as obviously, also points towards rurality, in that it resembles the checkered tablecloth emblematic of picnicking. If these inferences hold true, then what this image shows is a (Moth)man, wearing feminine-indexed jorts, ready for a striptease; if that this is the case, then Mothman, in all his subversive sexuality, is quite clearly queer. But this Mothman is not just any Mothman—as implied by his wings and location, he is a Blue Ridge Mountain Mothman, an Appalachian Mothman. Just as well, he is not just any kind of queer; he's a rural, Appalachian queer. In the same way that urban and/or non-Appalachian queers might employ styles derived from the queer traditions specific to their communities, I argue that so too might Appalachian queers—and, in fact, that this is exactly what this image represents. This is to say that, in this post, QA is semiotically demonstrating the intersectionality of queer-Appalachianness, in that Mothman's ensemble and surroundings mark him not just separately as rural/Appalachian and queer, but jointly as a queer-Appalachian (or Appalachian-queer).

QA's re-interpretation of the Daisy Dukes is of further interest as well.

Inarguably, *The Dukes of Hazzard* reifies the Confederacy through its constant use of

Confederate iconography.⁴ In doing, it also reifies white supremacy and anti-black racism. While it may seem possible that these indexical links could “bleed into” the Daisy Dukes as an article of clothing, I argue that that’s not actually what’s happening here. In fact, I believe QA’s decision to name the article of clothing ‘jorts’ instead of ‘Daisy Dukes’ in the post is, in some part, intentional. In doing so, QA does not engage with reproducing discourse associated with the Confederacy. This is but one way that queer-Appalachianess differs from other kinds of Appalachianess, especially those with more hegemonic agendas. If anything, it is more likely that the jorts’ indexical links to *non-normative gender expression* and *sexual liberation* (and by extension, *queerness*) prevail over any potential indexical links to *The Dukes of Hazzard*, and by extension, white supremacy. Again, I believe this to also be intentional on the part of QA. By re-appropriating denim cutoffs in this way, QA and their Instagram community are discursively severing their indexical ties to white supremacy, while still maintaining their indexical ties to sexual liberation, queerness, and ruralness. In doing so, they reject the legacy of white supremacy advocated for by racists across the US (not just the South). Importantly, this discursive action represents in miniature the antifascist and anti-racist political views presumably held by the QA community. Furthermore, it engages in the enregisterment of Mothman and other symbols as indexically queer, rural, Appalachian, and/or leftist.

⁴ For example, Bo and Luke Duke’s car is named the General Lee, after the Confederate general. The top of the car features the rebel flag, while the horn plays the first few notes of “Dixie.” “Dixie” has been described as the most well-known song to have originated from blackface minstrelsy and was also the de facto national anthem of the Confederacy (Sacks and Sacks 1993:158).

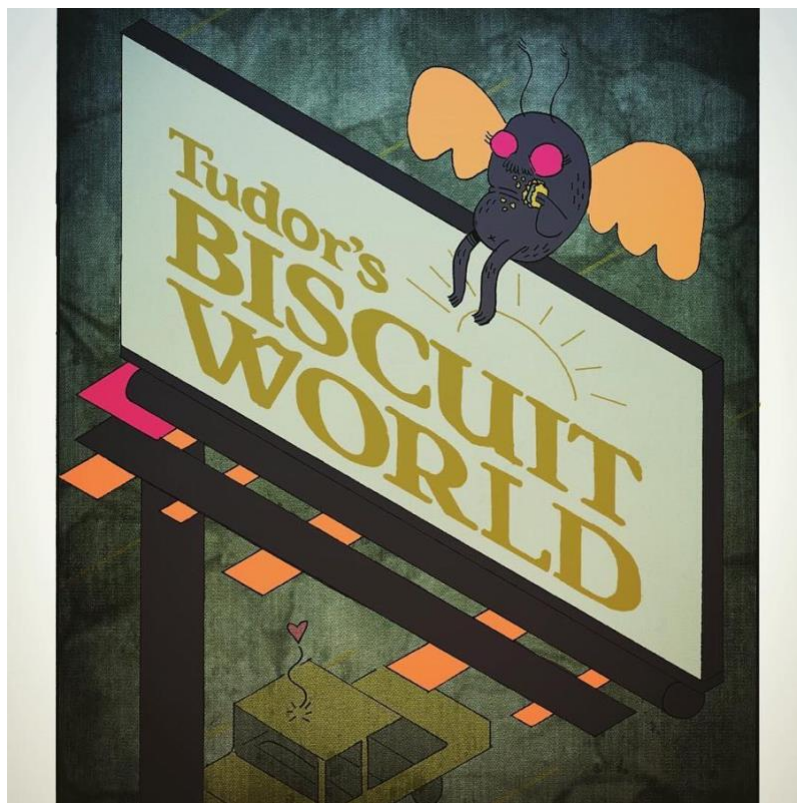


Figure 2: Mothman & Tudor's Biscuit World.

Created by Appalachian cartoonist Bryan Richards (Instagram: @best.virginia) as a submission for Dinner Bell Magazine. Reposted by @QueerAppalachia.

Figure 2 depicts a chubby and cartoonish Mothman sitting on a billboard overlooking a highway. The billboard depicts the logo of the popular restaurant franchise, Tudor's Biscuit World. As Mothman chews on a biscuit, a vehicle on the highway below emits a heart. In this example, Tudor's Biscuit World, Mothman, and a potential Appalachian (the driver) are semiotically juxtaposed to one another. This post is of note in that it represents one layer of the sedimentary process which has allowed for the (re)interpretation of Mothman as *Appalachian*. For one, it clearly features Tudor's at center, which is a well-known and much-loved central Appalachian dining institution. Given that a sign for Tudor's is only likely to be in or near Appalachia, it can be assumed that the setting for this picture is Appalachia, and that the driver of the vehicle below is

also Appalachian. Regardless, it is certain that the centering of Tudor's in this artwork is intended to index *Appalachia(n)*, if not also *familiarity for* or even *love for Appalachia*. Keeping with this line of logic, it would then follow that Mothman is, if anything, Appalachian as well; if not, it would seem that he at least likes Appalachian food. If the heart emitted by the driver is intended for Mothman, then it would seem that Mothman also has the approval of an Appalachian as well. All these facts seem to point towards a set of similar indexical meanings: Mothman, Appalachia, and Tudor's all somehow belong or fit together.

Tudor's aside, there is also something to be said for the biscuit and its iconic role in both marking (and in part, constituting) Southern and Appalachian culture. The poster child of Southern cuisine, biscuits are emblematic of comfort and belonging. Their consumption in this image, especially in Appalachia and the South, and especially by the Mothman, seems to suggest that no matter how different we may seem, by eating, we belong. By extension, this image may also be communicating that Appalachia and the South are home to all kinds of people: namely, queer people. The use of Mothman also functions as an example of the extremes to which Appalachia is inclusive of. This in turn suggests that there are no real limits as to who can or should live in Appalachia or the South—Appalachia is a home to all. The political context of the account further constrains the meaning of “all” here, though. Importantly, I argue that this “all” is intended to include and center the lives and experiences of those in the margins throughout Appalachia, the South, and the rural US. This is very different from the more neoliberal kind of “all” that might seek to include those who advocate for the dehumanization of others in the name of ‘free speech.



Figure 3: Rocky Horror Mothman

The image in Figure 3 again depicts the paper doll Mothman, but with colorful wings reminiscent of the Pride flag. Cosplaying as Dr. Frank-N-Furter from the cult classic *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, he wears glittery black lingerie and a pearl necklace. The indexical meaning of *queer*, and by extension the indexical characterization of Mothman as an overtly sexual queer man, is clearly expressed in this image and the accompanying text, in much the same way it was in Figure 1. Additionally, by invoking the text of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* and other texts related to the film, QA is also

pointing towards the camp (queer parody) stylings that have long been associated with queer art and culture (Meyer 2010; Meyer 2011). The creature stands in front of what looks like a red velvet curtain, calling to mind the theatre space seen at the end of the film, as well as the drama and glamour stereotypically associated with theatre spaces and queer people in theatre spaces, a move which in this case could be seen as an act of reclamation of potentially homophobic tropes. In this instance, viewers see the Mothman as someone who is distinctly queer, and it is only through the Appalachian context of the account and accompanying post that one can further link Mothman, in this instance, with Appalachianness and in turn, queer-Appalachianness. The post's text is as follows:

#rockyhorror#mothman w/ #blueridgemountainwings 8x10 print \$9.99 ALL profits buy winter coats for rural queers in need in the region. If you need a winter coat, email us through our website, both links in bio. If you're one of the folks that we have already helped get ready for winter this month, please consider writing us a note through our website that we can share with our followers.

Again, QA outright links Mothman to the Blue Ridge Mountains and, by extension, Appalachia. Furthermore, they also use Mothman in this instance as a rallying symbol for coat donations to other "rural queers in need in the region." In addition to depicting Mothman as queer, this post further links Mothman as a figure directly linked to the wellbeing of those in the Appalachian region, and especially those in the Appalachian region who are also queer and/or in-need. Furthermore, by not visually depicting the Mothman in this instance as distinctly Appalachian, Queer Appalachia may indirectly be suggesting that queerness is queerness, no matter where it is. Alternatively, they may be suggesting that Mothman is an Appalachian enough symbol that dressing him as Frank-N-Furter gets the "queer-Appalachian" point across in a sufficiently succinct way, without any additions necessary. Importantly, this post also represents one

of the most common kinds of posts on QA’s Instagram: those about mutual aid and harm reduction. Although this instance is more atypical of that type of post, it nonetheless is representative of both QA’s distinct leftist (re)imagining of Appalachia, as well as the association of Mothman with a distinct brand of leftist theory and praxis that is uniquely colored by the lived experiences of queer-Appalachians.

4.1.3 Witches and Granny Women



Figure 4: Southern Lesbian Witches

Although the Mothman features as the most prominent folkloric figure in the posts of the Queer Appalachia Instagram account, other figures from both local and global folklore are included as well. The most recurrent of these is that of the witch. In parts of Appalachia, “witch” can be used to describe a person of any gender, so the use of “witch” is not necessarily indicative of a role available only to (cis) women like it might be in other

communities. For instance, one of QA's first Instagram posts, made on August 10, 2016, includes a photo from the Second National March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights, which took place on October 11th, 1987.

In Figure 4, a group of people described by QA as "Social Justice Queer Granny Witches" carry a homespun textile banner which reads "Southern Lesbian Witches" upon a twilight-colored mountain horizon, accompanied by a black cat in the bottom right and a spider web in the top right. Though the image partly draws upon popular Halloween-inspired witch iconography, it also positions the queer Appalachian witches in the photo as a particular kind of person. In conjunction with QA's caption, this post represents the first of many QA posts that feature witches, as well as their first post about Granny Witches. In Appalachia, the Granny Witch is a folk healer with roots dating back to at least the 1800s. John C. Campbell, an educator and reformist known for his sociological surveys of southern Appalachia, wrote about these women in 1921, stating:

There is something magnificent in many of the older women with their stern theology—part mysticism, part fatalism—and their deep understanding of life. Patience, endurance, and resignation are written in the close-set mouth and in the wrinkles about the eyes; but the eyes themselves are kindly, full of interest, not unrelieved by a twinkling appreciation of pleasant things. 'Granny'—and one may be a grandmother young in the mountains—if she has survived the labor and tribulation of her younger days, has gained a freedom and a place of irresponsible authority in home hardly rivaled by the men of the family. Her grown sons pay to her an attention which they do not always accord their wives; and her husband, while he remains still undisputed master of the home, defers to her opinion to a degree unknown in her younger days. Her daughters and her grandchildren she frankly rules. Though superstitious she has a fund of common sense, and she is a shrewd judge of character. In sickness she is the first to be consulted, for she is generally something of an herb doctor, and her advice is sought by the young people of half the countryside in all things from a love affair to putting a new web in the loom. It is not surprising if she is something of a pessimist on the subject of marriage. 'Don't you *never* get married,' is advice that is more than likely to pass her lips (140).

Though this excerpt is certainly not without its obvious biases, many of which reinforce harmful stereotypes about Appalachia and its people, it nonetheless presents one of many contemporary accounts of this folk healing tradition before it passed into the imagined history and heritage of the region—that is, if it ever actually did. Although the context of the late 19th and early 20th centuries may have passed, the Granny Witch/Granny Woman tradition clearly persists in some way, as evidenced by many of Queer Appalachia’s Instagram posts, where community members identify or are identified as Granny Witches. In doing so, they negotiate the role and function of Granny Witches and Granny Women, not just as imagined archetypes co-constituted through community interaction, but also as real people with essential roles and functions in the community.

As constituted by QA community interactions, the modern Granny Witch is, like her predecessor, a person of power. However, she need not necessarily be a woman by 18th or 19th century standards. In other words, whereas the original interpretation centers cisheteronormative ideas of womanhood, such as childbirth and homemaking, the modern iteration does not. Instead, the QA interpretation widens the scope, including any person of non-normative gender identity or presentation, who may or may not be a woman. This interpretation, though, is not unique to queer Appalachians or the QA Instagram. In fact, it almost certainly draws upon more recent, ‘new age’ interpretations of witches (e.g., wiccans and pagans), which are also linked to gay, and specifically, lesbian identities and practices (Barrett 2017). Most importantly, they challenge more normative assumptions and expectations about gender, another characteristic shared with their Appalachian predecessors. In doing so, these three interpretations reflect the fact that, for many, to be

queer or to be a woman in a homophobic and misogynistic society is to take on a politicized identity, whether by choice or not. This demonstrates the possibility for Granny Witches throughout the decades to be well positioned for work within the normative constraints of gender, while also violating those constraints on their own terms. In doing so, they push the boundary a little further each time as they negotiate gender, politics, and other facets of social life while navigating the harmful realities of a patriarchal and cisheteronormative society. For example, as Campbell implies above, the Granny Witch of the 18th and 19th centuries, having dutifully performed her roles as mother and wife, is rewarded for her tribulations with untold wisdom and authority over her family, including her husband and adult sons, as well as respect from the community who come to her for advice and healing. Despite her apparent commitment to her family, however, she warns young adults against marriage, the very institution responsible, in part, for her status as matriarch. This may be the reason her successors, as represented by the QA community, are often unmarried, childless, queer, or otherwise non-adherent to cisheteronormative ideologies. Based on these findings, I argue that what is actually maintained between the Campbell's 18th/19th century Granny Witch and QA's modern counterpart is not the transgression of the same norms, but rather the act of transgression and social (re)interpretation itself. Likewise, in comparison to the 'new age' genre of witch, I argue that in (queer) Appalachia at least, the 'new age' witch and the Granny Witch have become syncretized, allowing for QA's interpretation which synthesizes aspects of both kinds of witches.

Those familiar with the history of witch-lore in Appalachia, the US, or the British Isles may be unsurprised by these findings; witches within these areas are often

conceived of as powerful, subversive figures who threaten the status quo. Likewise, the historical persecution of people believed to be witches in Europe and colonial America demonstrates the once real fear that witches could and would threaten the status quo. I argue that this context easily allows for the politicization of the witch; this process is further reinforced by their alleged ability to instantly affect change through magic, in much the same way people affect major political change through direct action. Therefore, in much the same way that a person or community might claim Mothman and other monsters as a sort of mascot in an act of reclamation against normative society, so too might a person or community adopt the already-politically-charged label of witch, in a politico-spiritual act of defiance against normative society. By assuming the mantle of witch, the Granny Witches as presented by QA are (re-)connecting themselves and their communities to a shared heritage of healing and mutual aid. This sociohistorical context sets the precedent for a future Appalachia founded on leftist praxis, freed from the deadly constraints of capitalism and white supremacy. This is important, because the forces that bolster capitalism and white supremacy engage in and benefit from the suppression of narratives of mutual aid and community care, especially in Appalachia and the US South. As an “alternative”, these forces espouse a debt of loyalty, respect, and reverence for the Confederacy and, in turn, indoctrination into white supremacist ideologies. With the stakes this high, it follows that Granny Witches, as represented by the QA Instagram community, would stand in diametric opposition to white supremacy and other fascist ideologies. One post, made on November 28, 2016, makes this especially clear:



Figure 5: Granny Witch's Against the KKK

The post features a symbol of a white circle on a black, square background. Inside the circle are three white broomsticks, laid diagonal and in parallel, their handles pointing to the top-right corner of the image, and the text around the image reads “Granny Witch’s Against the KKK”. This post again demonstrates that the QA community’s interpretation of the Granny Witch figure is diametrically opposed to white supremacy. However, rather than being implied as in the previous post, it is stated outright. Effectively, this leaves no room for debate. As heirs to the Granny Witch legacy, the members of the QA community acknowledge the history and continued presence of racism and white supremacy in the US, and particularly in Appalachia and the US South, and adapt the Granny Witch to the current times. Again, the scope is widened—like the Southern Lesbian Witches marching on Washington in 1987, the contemporary Granny Witch is a healer not just of the body and spirit, but of social injustice as well. Furthermore, these

folk healers represent a threat to institutionalized medicine, thus serving as subversive figures to a social institution that has neglected and exploited Appalachia (e.g., the opioid epidemic), as well as worked to undermine its own folk health traditions, such as midwifery. In this sense, it is no surprise to find Granny Witches at the heart of the Queer Appalachia community. As agents of social change and political action through transgression, subversion, and disruption, they represent one of the rare instances where folklore and social reality so obviously intersect. This intersection in particular reinforces the importance of folklore as a means for connecting to and reckoning with one's own history, especially as a means for navigating the lived realities of one's present.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

This analysis has first and foremost demonstrated the importance and utility of folkloric discourse as a resource for queer (and) Appalachian identity work. Specifically, it has highlighted the ways in which Appalachian folklore, namely that of the Mothman and of witches, is used by members of the Queer Appalachia Instagram community to forge queer-Appalachian identities in spite of cisheteronormative and metronormative constraints. The usage of this folklore in this kind of discourse is, importantly, intersectional—it defies the binary and reflects the lived realities of queer Appalachians. In fact, this research greatly demonstrates the versatility and nuance of Crenshaw’s model of intersectionality (1989; 1991). Crenshaw’s model not only helps to explain the workings of intersectional oppression and marginalization, but also to understand how intersectional identities are discursively and interactively created or enacted. Further research which applies Crenshaw’s model of intersectionality to groups like queer Appalachians may help to further establish the similarities in oppression and lived experience between discursively separated sociopolitical groups. In essence, I hope that this and future research of this kind will bolster solidarity and reinforce the notion that the struggle of all oppressed people is a common one.

One of the most significant findings from this research is the fluidity and freedom with which folklore, and by extension folkloric discourse, seems to be imbued. Essentially, it seems to suggest that folklore and its subjects can act as discursive canvasses where the constraints of normative social life are lessened, in some way. I suggest that folkloric discourse of this kind plays a vital role in identity work; specifically, in the identity work of individuals and communities with conflicting

constraints. Although I would not suggest that this quality is unique to folklore as a discursive subject, it no less proves the need for further research into folklore as a contemporary, socially mediated site of linguistic practice and identity formation.

Looking forward, future researchers into online-mediated folkloric discourse may find it useful to look at discourses across social media communities to see how they compare. For example, singularly queer Mothman discourse is quite common on the internet as well, and anecdotally, it is both different from and similar to queer-Appalachian Mothman discourse. Likewise, an inquiry into how other cryptids and folkloric figures, such as the Jersey Devil of New Jersey or the Flatwoods Monster of West Virginia, or even the Babadook from the Australian horror film of the same name, are socially linked to regional and other identities would no doubt be vastly informative as to the breadth of this phenomenon. More practically, I also hope that these findings and subsequent studies will encourage community leaders, activists, and others ‘on the ground’ in queer Appalachian communities. For those people, I hope it will be reassuring to know that Appalachia is being (re-)defined by you and your communities. The sheer existence of these communities, and the inevitable desire to interact and identify, forge new possibilities for queer Appalachian ways of being. In doing so, they make once-imaginary futures real and claim both queerness and Appalachianess in their own ways and on their own terms.

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